

Unlike some pasodobles, it is instantly recognizable as being an integral part of la fiesta de toros; it *reeks* of the bullring. The New Grove Dictionary of Music says of this quintessential piece, "The pasodoble from *El Gato Montés* is universally familiar as the epitome of Spanish bullfight music." From the very beginning we noticed that recordings of this piece often had vocal accompaniment in the form of *olé*s shouted in unison at climactic points: *daaaaa, da da DA, DAA, DA-da (¡olé!)*. Similarly, applause is often included, as though there is actually a matador out there executing beautiful lances or muletazos. Why has this piece, and seemingly *only* this piece, been so singled out and played so much at corridas over the passing decades?

As it turns out, of all the operas written over the centuries, there has been only one with a true taurine theme, and the highlight piece from this opera is the pasodoble whose title is the same as the opera itself -- *El Gato Montés*. Most appropriately, the opera's composer was a Spaniard and an avid taurino, Manuel Penella (1880-1939), fittingly a native of Valencia, Spain's renowned cradle of musicians. Penella, it seems, was quite an interesting fellow in his own right. The handsome composer could also list to his credits his feats as an accomplished musician, a merchant mariner and world traveler, and a great aficionado de toros. Penella's coming onto the scene at this time was most fortunate for aficionados, especially when one realizes that Spain has no great opera tradition and has, in fact, produced only two widely recognized operas since a handful of native composers ushered the country into the ranks of nations turning out "high class" music, beginning in the late 19th century. One of those operas, a full length work, was Penella's early 20th century epic *El Gato Montés*; the other was *La Vida Breve* by Manuel de Falla, from the same period. Falla's opera is as *breve* as *la vida* it celebrates: it lasts only an hour -- a mere blink of the eye compared with, say, *Die Meistersinger*, which regularly sees terminally bored husbands (dragged to the seemingly

days-long Wagnerian extravaganza by their wives) hanging themselves in the men's room at the first intermission. Aside from the two Spanish operas mentioned, much else in the way of Spanish music fell into the categories of zarzuela, española, or various types of folk music (flamenco, jota, etc.).

But wait! you say. What about *Carmen*? Well, first of all it is not a taurine-themed opera, although it is set in Sevilla and features a matador in a secondary role. It is primarily a story about a young girl and a soldier. There is little doubt but what Penella was influenced by *Carmen* (as well as by Blasco Ibañez's *Blood and Sand*), but *El Gato Montés* is not a copy or ripoff of anything previously done. Second, *Carmen* was written not by a Spaniard but by a Frenchman, Georges Bizet, and its language is *française*. *Oui, oui, monsieur toreador*.

And if one calls up as "Spanish opera" such works as *The Barber of Seville*, *Fedelio* or *Le Cid*, remember that all were written by non-Spaniards (Rossini, Beethoven and Massenet) and none of them had a taurine theme.

The opera *El Gato Montés* opened in 1916 and its highlight, the pasodoble, proved to be such a powerful and popular piece that it continued to be a regularly played favorite -- by café orchestras and concert bands as well as bandas taurinas at corridas -- long after the opera itself had been forgotten. And then the mother work was revived spectacularly by Plácido Domingo toward the end of the 20th century for Sevilla's Expo '92. This proved to be a shrewd, nationalistic choice on the part of Domingo, particularly as the opera takes place in and around Sevilla, including a scene at La Maestranza. The 1992 revival was a smashing success and Domingo moved the opera on to Madrid and other cities around the world, including, for the 1996-97 season, fourteen performances at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. -- where we were fortunate enough to see it.

Domingo's interest in *El Gato Montés* was not just passing. He had fond memories of performing in that

opera with his parents' Mexico City troupe when he was a boy, and when the opportunity presented itself many years later to resuscitate this old favorite, he did so. The musical -- and taurine -- mundillos owe him a boatload of thanks for his efforts.

The original run of the opera began, as mentioned, in 1916, when it debuted at Valencia's Teatro Principal. Penella intended it to be a serious, solemn occasion, but the audience -- apparently comprised in no small part of fervent taurinos -- enjoyed it so much and was so enthusiastic at its conclusion that the composer was hoisted a hombros and carried through the streets of the city like a triumphant matador, all the way to his house.

*El Gato Montés* then made the move from Valencia to Madrid, playing at the Gran Teatro in 1917, followed by productions elsewhere in Spain and the Americas -- including New York's Park Theatre in 1921. The New York critics weren't sure how to assess the opera; reviews in the various newspapers referred to "a Spanish opera," "a Spanish operetta," "a music drama," "a Spanish baby-grand opera given in a ruthless vernacular," and -- in a summation by one who may have been an early animal rightser -- "curious and tedious." In the United States the opera was sung in English, using a translation which was apparently ludicrous. *The New York Times* noted the language "caused us to grin even in the most lugubrious interludes." (Having read the libretto in both the original and English versions, we can readily understand the comment by the reviewer for *The Times*.)

Interest in *El Gato Montés* the opera was still running high enough in 1935 for it to be made into a Spanish movie starring the lovely Maria de Pilar Lebrón. But then it "went dormant" and virtually disappeared from public view until its resurrection in 1992. The pasodoble itself, of course, remained as popular as ever throughout this entire period, but most people either forgot or were never made aware of its origins.

*El Gato Montés* is more than just an opera with a taurine theme and setting. It is an opera *about* toreo for taurinos.